



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Stella Does Tricks

Citation for published version:

Murray, J 2015, Stella Does Tricks. in B Nowlan & Z Finch (eds), *Directory of World Cinema: Scotland*. 1st edn, Intellect Ltd., Bristol/Chicago, pp. 250-253.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Directory of World Cinema: Scotland

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Murray, J. (2015). Stella Does Tricks. In B. Nowlan, & Z. Finch (Eds.), *Directory of World Cinema: Scotland*. (1st ed., pp. 250-253). Bristol/Chicago: Intellect Ltd .

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Title: *Stella Does Tricks*

Country of Origin: UK

Year: 1998

Language: English

Production Companies: Compulsive Films, Sidewalk Productions, Scottish Arts Council Lottery Fund, Scottish Film Production Fund

Filming Locations: Glasgow, London

Director: Coky Giedroyc

Producers: Adam Barker, Angus Lamont

Screenwriter: A. L. Kennedy

Cinematographer: Barry Ackroyd

Art Director: Tim Ellis

Editor: Budge Tremlett

Runtime: 99 minutes

Cast (Starring): Kelly Macdonald, James Bolam, Hans Matheson

Synopsis: The heroine of *Stella Does Tricks* is a multiply marginalised central protagonist. Sexually abused as a child by her alcoholic, failed stand-up comedian father, Stella has run away from her native Glasgow to London. There, however, she falls into the clutches of Mr Peters, an utterly amoral middle-aged pimp who baulks at nothing in order to exert complete physical and psychological control over his unhappy stable of young female victims. But Stella bravely attempts to leave Peters and forge a new life for herself, relying on two forms of personal support and strength as she does so. The first of these is internal in nature and relates to one possible meaning of the ‘tricks’ foregrounded within the film’s title. A series of fantasy and/or memory sequences that punctuate the narrative demonstrate Stella’s remarkable capacity, through the resources of her fecund imagination, to repeatedly confront the tragedies of her past and temporarily circumvent those of her present. Secondly, she also derives succour from the romantic relationship she begins with Eddie, a young drug addict who makes a living on the fringes of the capital’s squalid sex trade. Ultimately, however, Stella’s lover becomes yet another man whose personal weakness leads him to betray and abuse her. After Eddie allows her to be raped by a housemate in order to finance his addiction, Stella overdoses – whether accidentally or not remains unclear – on pills and alcohol. In a final fantasy sequence, she dons one of her father’s gaudy stage outfits in order to perform an onstage monologue in front of a small theatre audience. During this performance Stella concludes that, “some men have penis extensions and some men *are* penis extensions.” The implication is that this unedifying truth represents the cause of her premature demise.

Critique: Although not nearly as widely seen or discussed as the near-contemporaneous variations on Scottish and/or British social realist cinematic traditions essayed by filmmakers such as Peter Mullan and Ken Loach, a notably ambitious and accomplished work. Writer A. L. Kennedy and director Coky Giedroyc offer viewers an unsparing documentary portrait of a bestially exploited late-twentieth-century British female underclass on one hand *and* an expressionistic exploration of the complex capacities and consequences of the human imagination on the other. From outset to end, constant and calculated shifts in narrative register (reality versus fantasy), timeframe (present versus past), and location (London versus Glasgow) clearly distance the movie from the more classically naturalistic *modus operandi* that structures much contemporary social realist cinema emanating from Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

On closer viewing, however, *Stella Does Tricks* proposes that the factual and the fantastic have never been mutually incompatible narrative approaches within native cinematic and literary traditions of depicting the struggle for survival at the bottom of the British capital city's teeming social heap. Indeed, Kennedy and Giedroyc advance that argument right from their work's very opening, a profoundly disturbing first scene in which Sodom and Gomorrah comes to seem uncomfortably close to Kensington and Chelsea. As Mr Peters, Stella's repulsive middle-aged pimp, instructs his teenage slave to masturbate him while both sit on a public park bench in broad daylight, he simultaneously compels her to (re)play a grotesque fiction which parodies the sentimental ideal of the paterfamilias. During this performance, Peters becomes, in Stella's obedient words, "the nice man who took me in... like in numerous of the works of [Charles] Dickens." Fact and fantasy are here figured as interdependent means through which individuals understand the world, and consequently come to act within it in very particular ways. The reality of wholesale sexual exploitation as an everyday component of modern-day British urban life is presented as a lamentable phenomenon that is partially dependent upon the inability and/or refusal of both abuser and abused to accurately recognise and verbalise the true nature of their respective situations and motivations.

The swiftly established Dickensian literary reference point is also vital to *Stella Does Tricks* for several other reasons. Perhaps most obviously, it allows the film to stress the extent to which many of the glaring social inequalities and inequities depicted within much nineteenth-century British fiction still persist within the country's capital city some one-hundred-and-fifty years later. Inhuman exploitation of children and the decimation of large swathes of London's poorest citizens through narcotic abuse stalk the images of *Stella Does Tricks* as surely as they do the pages of *Oliver Twist*. More complexly, however, such depressing artistic and social parallels also allow Giedroyc and Kennedy to contend that Scottish and/or British social realist traditions of fiction (cinematic or otherwise) have been distorted by a historic predominance of male artistic voices and perspectives at the expense of female alternatives. For example, while their film exploits a range of motifs and plotlines familiar from Dickens' novels, it also refuses utterly to conform to the profoundly sentimental ideal of gender identities and relations which surfaces repeatedly within that author's oeuvre. With regard to both her ultimate unhappy fate and the courageous agency with which she seeks to evade it, Stella is anything but a contemporary reincarnation of Little Nell, the impossibly virtuous cipher at the heart of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or any subsequent indigenous fictional

paragon of demurely helpless feminine purity and vulnerability. As she herself puts matters to Eddie, “I’m not your girl, I’m nobody’s girl.”

For such reasons, the narrative of *Stella Does Tricks* is permeated by the idea that a truly just (and justly depicted) society would be one that acknowledged and encouraged feminine imaginative depictions of individual and collective experience as a necessary corrective to the traditional dominance of masculine equivalents. The film’s heroine is a born storyteller, a highly creative young woman who proudly and justifiably boasts to a group of fellow prostitutes that “I can picture any fucking scene: I have the technology, it’s my thing.” Indeed, one possible way of reading the film involves seeing it as a charting of Stella’s struggle to reimagine – and thus, to reclaim – her own identity and destiny after a lifetime of submitting to such things being misrepresented and maligned within the self-serving imaginations of a series of pathetic, but nonetheless profoundly dangerous, men. She suggests as much to Eddie at one point, noting that “I want to be like me – I’ve never been like me for years.”

In addition to forming a representative articulation of the gender politics of *Stella Does Tricks*, the assertion by the film’s heroine that she “can picture any fucking scene” also possesses considerable resonance and importance when considering the cultural development and diversity of Scottish cinema more generally. Remarkably, when *Stella Does Tricks* was released in British cinemas in 1998 it was at that point in time only the second Scottish-themed and -financed fiction feature ever directed by a woman, following in the footsteps of Margaret Tait’s *Blue Black Permanent* (1993). Thankfully, Scottish filmmaking since the turn of the millennium has witnessed an increasing number of female-authored and/or female-centred works, including films such as *Blinded* (Eleanor Yule, 2003), *Donkeys* (Morag Mackinnon, 2010), *Morvern Callar* (Lynne Ramsay, 2002), *One Life Stand* (May Miles Thomas, 2000), and *Red Road* (Andrea Arnold, 2006). While that phenomenon has not yet been properly acknowledged and explored by film scholars, *Stella Does Tricks* undoubtedly represented an important pioneering step in its long-overdue development.

Jonathan Murray